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ABSTRACT

This booklet tells of the 1987 struggle teachers and parents of a racially-integrated, working-class neighborhood of Milwaukee faced when the central administration of the Milwaukee Public Schools announced the closing of the neighborhood school. Parents and teachers dreamed of a decent school that children would want to attend, in an integrated neighborhood, teaching children to be bilingual in Spanish and English, using cooperative and innovative methods, governed by a council of parents and teachers. La Escuela Fratney grew from the tradition of a long history of progressivism in Wisconsin. The struggles for Fratney School are recounted with both its successes and challenges that lie ahead. (EH)

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Teachers and Parents: The Milwaukee Experience

*TEACHERS
AND PARENTS:
THE MILWAUKEE
EXPERIENCE*

Robert Peterson

THE 1991 CATHERINE MOLONY
MEMORIAL LECTURE

The City College Workshop Center

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THE CITY COLLEGE WORKSHOP CENTER, founded in 1972, is committed to helping schools better support the continuous, active, and individual learning of children. In that context, it serves City College classes and all school people -- teachers, administrators, parents, paraprofessionals, -- who are trying to expand, revitalize, and make more specific their response to the efforts of children to make sense of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

In late 1987, La Escuela Fratney was only a dream on the part of a group of parents and teachers who gathered in each other's homes on the northeast side of Milwaukee. The central administration of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) had announced the closing of a school building in the neighborhood. In response, a few of us organized a group of parents, teachers, and community activists called Neighbors for a New Fratney.

We started to dream of a decent school that children would want to attend, in an integrated neighborhood, teaching children to be bilingual in Spanish and English, using cooperative and innovative methods, governed by a council of parents and teachers.

As 1988 began, our small multiracial neighborhood organization mobilized the community, and in just a few months, won control of an inner city elementary school. Our success, in fact, was so swift and unexpected that even those of us who had organized the effort were taken aback.

As a 25-year-veteran in the student, civil rights, peace and educational reform movements, I've become accustomed to losing and so this victory came as somewhat of a shock.

What we have found, actually, is that winning is harder than losing.

You can walk away from your losses; you have to assume responsibility for what you win. In this instance, an entire school. Some day it might be an entire society. In fact, the long-term success of democratic experiments like Fratney is integrally linked to the success of the broader social movements. But I will speak of those connections a bit later.

I wish now to tell you a little about Milwaukee, describe the struggles to win Fratney schools, and then reflect on the lessons of the Fratney experience itself.

First, a little about Milwaukee. Milwaukee is a city of 628,000 people, with more than twice as many inhabitants in the entire metropolis. It sits 85 miles north of Chicago astride the western shore of Lake Michigan. Dubbed by the city's promoters as the Great City on the Great Lake, it is the home of the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team, although

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most of the breweries have packed up their vats and moved south to non-union labor.

And while some in Milwaukee brag of the city's multitude of ethnic festivals and about its voluntary school desegregation plan, it has some of the sharpest divisions between blacks and whites of any major city in the U.S. For example, Milwaukee is among the top three most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the nation, with most suburbs being 99 percent white. We have the highest black teenage pregnancy rate in the country. In the 1989-90 school year, the grade point average for black high school students was 1.31 and for hispanic students, 1.47 ("C" = 2.0). The completion rate for entering 9th-graders hovers at a dismal 46 percent for blacks, 49 percent for hispanics and 62 percent for whites.

In the past year, we have been in the national news not only for a mass murderer, but a private school choice plan, Afro-American immersion schools, Learnfare, and a newly formed Black Panther Militia.

Less well-known about Milwaukee is its long history of grassroots organizing around educational issues: The massive anti-segregation school boycotts of 1963 and 1964, the walk-outs by Mexican and Puerto Rican students in the early 1970s to demand bilingual education, the movements to build new high schools in poor black and hispanic neighborhoods, the effort to secure the rights of exceptional children, the movement to institute equitable desegregation after a federal court order in 1976, and most recently, significant attempts to reform the curricula and construct some decent public schools.

This activism should be set in the context of a long history of progressivism, from a strong abolitionist movement in the 1850s, to a radical labor movement which organized a general strike in favor of the eight-hour workday in 1886, to electoral politics that elected the first socialist to Congress in 1910 and socialist mayors up to 1960.

THE STRUGGLE FOR LA ESCUELA FRATNEY

Originally the 90-year-old Fratney building was marked for

demolition. It meant little to the school bureaucracy that the neighborhood around the school was one of the few racially integrated, working-class neighborhoods in the city. The old staff and student body of Fratney St. School was to move in April of 1988 to a new school six blocks away.

But a few of us in the neighborhood -- teachers and parents -- saw how the soon to be vacated Fratney could be the home of an educational program that capitalized on the unique features of the neighborhood.

In a few short weeks, we developed a comprehensive proposal for a two-way bilingual, whole language, multicultural, site-based managed, neighborhood, specialty school. We called it La Escuela Fratney for short. As one parent said, "We started to dream about a school that would provide the highest quality education for all of our children, black, white, and hispanic".

The central administration, otherwise known as Central Office, had other dreams, however, which came to be viewed as nightmares by some community activists. Once it was decided not to raze the Fratney St. School building, Central Office wanted to turn the emptied space into an "Exemplary Teaching Center". The staff would have been comprised of "master teachers": practitioners with master's degrees and at least ten years of teaching experience using the techniques of Madeline Hunter, an educator who has greatly profited financially marketing a "teacher proof" instructional method. Their job would have been to work with MPS teachers who were having classroom difficulties. The teachers would have been brought in for two-and-a-half week training stints. Many parents came forward to question Central Office on their plan. No one wanted their kids taught by a series of "bad teachers". They also argued that such a center could be established anywhere in the city, while the New Fratney proposal depended on being at its present site in a multicultural neighborhood.

On New Year's Day 1988, our posters went out. We called for community meetings and a public hearing. A bitter snow storm on the day of the hearing forced all schools in the city to close the next day, but the turnout for the meeting was so large that it convinced the School Board of the need to give our proposal serious consideration. They

directed Central Office to meet us and to try to come back with a revised recommendation.

From the beginning, the leadership at Central Office appeared unable to integrate our plan into their thinking. Their "compromise" solution called for combining what was uncombinable. What we had proposed -- a whole language, two-way bilingual model; cooperative learning, and a school that was organized and governed by a site-based management council of teachers and parents -- was in fact the opposite of their "compromise". What they wanted was a top-down model for a teacher-training school organized and run by Central Office. As we sat negotiating with the top administrators in the superintendent's conference room, the absurdity of the situation became evident. In one exchange, I pointed out to the then-superintendent Hawthorne Faison that there was an inherent contradiction between having a school run by the staff development academy and a local group of teachers and parents. Moreover Central Office's proposal for the exemplary teacher center had not mentioned the word parents once. "Wait", responded one top official, "while it is true we didn't mention parents once in our proposal, your proposal didn't mention Central Office".

The representatives of Neighbors for a New Fraternity left that meeting almost in shock. Bad enough this bizarre failure to understand our proposal; worse was the atmosphere of fear that pervaded the meeting. The administrators only spoke after raising their hands and being recognized by the superintendent and then only in a tentative, timid fashion. More frightening was having three staff members come up to some of us in the hall after the meeting and, while glancing back over their shoulders, urge us not to compromise. They thought that our proposal was sound and should be left intact -- but, they said, they couldn't say anything out of fear of repercussions.

We stuck to our position and continued to mobilize our community. We did this in the midst of relatively favorable political conditions. The school board had a few months earlier publicly gone on record in favor of site-based management. Members of the African-American community led by Howard Fuller -- our newly appointed

superintendent -- were demanding an independent school district, charging among other things that the bureaucracy was incapable of listening to parents. School board members had become aware of the benefits of a whole-language teaching approach, in part due to our previous efforts in *Rethinking Schools*, a newspaper of which I am a co-editor. The long and short of it was that the school board not only passed our proposal and established the first citywide specialty school with neighborhood preference -- which meant giving children who lived in the neighborhood first choice in enrollment -- the board also directed Central Office to cooperate with Neighbors for a New Fratney.

Here I want to tell you a little story that underscores the importance of the individual teacher in effecting change. One school board member confessed to me several months after our battle had been won that one thing that strongly influenced him in approving the new Fratney was the quality of the teaching his son was receiving in first grade in the classroom of a whole-language teacher. During a key school board meeting, he said, he found himself in the back room discussing the Fratney proposal with a top MPS administrator and realized that the man hadn't the slightest idea of what our proposal involved. "Quite honestly", the board member told me, "I didn't really know what you were talking about either, but I knew this much. My son had started first grade in a classroom of a teacher who used what she called 'whole-language' techniques. By Thanksgiving, my kid was coming home and writing and publishing his own books, excited about reading and writing, loving to read and to be read to. I knew I had to support your proposal".

END OF ONE STAGE, BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

The School Board's approval essentially concluded the first stage of our struggle -- what I call the struggle for political power. It lasted all of eight weeks. The next stage was struggling over the program -- from staffing to selection of the principal, to renovation of the facility, to curriculum and materials. Unfortunately what Central Office failed to do politically, at the board level, they attempted to do

administratively -- and this right from the beginning.

For example, despite the explicit order by the school board directing Central Office to cooperate with our group, a couple of weeks passed with no contact at all. Finally, through one of our well placed moles, we heard that an important meeting to plan the new Fratney was to take place the next day. Uninvited, we asked one of the parents in our group to attend. Because the parent had no idea of where the meeting was to be held, she waited until five minutes after the meeting was scheduled to begin to approach the secretary of the administrator in charge, and asked to be taken to the meeting. Innocent of what was going on, the secretary escorted our representative into a room of open-mouthed, surprised administrators. It was an embarrassed Central Office that finally agreed to meet with us and start planning.

But between March and September, the administration continued to stall, ignore and even sabotage our efforts at every turn. For example, to deal with union seniority rules that might permit teachers to transfer to Fratney even though they disagreed with our approach, we proposed that when staff openings were announced all teachers be given a one-page explanation of our program. The Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association agreed to go along with our proposal as did lower level administrators. But the higher authorities at Central Office decided against it, and it was never carried out.

Similarly, when the community called for a nationwide search for a principal, the administration refused, and then proceeded to stall in hiring anyone. Finally a month before the school was to open, and in opposition to what a parent committee had recommended, the administration recommended the appointment of a woman with only suburban experience. She was bilingual -- but in English and German, not English and Spanish. This was seen as a direct affront to the community and once again the community mobilized. Holding picket signs proclaiming slogans such as "Remember Goulart" -- in reference to a not dissimilar struggle at the College for the Deaf in Washington DC -- dozens of parents came to school board meetings. Bowing to pressure and publicity, newly hired

superintendent Robert S. Peterkin, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, recognized the idiocy of Central Office's action and rejected the recommendation. Peterkin hired an interim principal acceptable to the community.

Then there was the struggle over developing the curriculum. Three teachers, I among them, wrote a draft curriculum at Central Office in late June and in July. At that time there were 240 administrators on hand; people who for the most part had bitterly opposed our plan. We were like three peace activists working in the Pentagon. Crucial information on budgetary matters and administrative procedures were only forthcoming from the bureaucrats if we asked the precisely correct question. Secretarial help seemed in extremely short supply when it came to our needs. Even minor issues became a source of antagonism for Central Office.

For example, there were old desks at our school -- what are called bicycle desks because the chair is attached to the desk. Needless to say such pieces of furniture are not particularly conducive to cooperative groups, or to the placing of chairs together in a circle. Despite repeated requests, the administrator in charge refused to change the desks for newer ones, until one day when I announced to him that we had changed our minds. I told him we wanted the old desks to stay because on the first day of school, all the parents, teachers and students were going to pile them up on the playground and call a press conference, and expose the administration for failing to support our project. The next morning, there were two truckloads of new desks at our school.

As a consequence of such low-level combat, our whole planing process was too eclectic and rushed. We went from approval by the board in February to a hasty opening in September -- something I don't recommend as a model for opening a new school.

When we returned in mid-August to make what we thought were to be final preparations for an opening a few weeks later, we found that necessary renovations had only begun and that the school still needed to be cleaned from the previous spring. Curiously nothing that we had ordered in July had yet arrived. We called vendors, and they told us

they had no record of our orders. Much to our horror we discovered that although the requisition forms had been signed on July 18 or before by an associate superintendent, the forms had sat in the purchasing division for a month because the department did not have an authorization card with the associate superintendent's signature. We learned that the forms had not been sent out until August 15 -- a full month after we had completed them. The error was particularly annoying because many books had disappeared when the school closed; our two-way bilingual school necessitated new materials, and the few library books that remained at Fratney were in boxes because of the delayed renovation of the library. We started school with virtually no materials. "Well, at least we ordered a high-quality Xerox machine", one of my colleagues said hopefully. "We can rely on that for the first few weeks of school". But of course when we called up to check on that order, somehow it had been lost.

At that point we had another one of our philosophical discussions. Was this all happening because of sabotage or incompetence? To this day, we do not know. We prefer to believe it was sabotage, because the alternative is even more frightening.

Needless to say we did not sit back and wait. We stormed back up to Central Office and fortunately, this time we had gained an ally -- actually two, the new superintendent and his assistant, Dr. Deborah McGriff (both of whom unfortunately left Milwaukee last June). McGriff was flabbergasted by our story. She listened intensely as we hinted that our next step would be a round-the-clock occupation of the school and she took immediate steps to get the administrators in line.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OUR PROGRAM

Unfortunately the consequence of the months of inaction and poor planning were acutely felt throughout our first year. But the problems had a positive effect, too. It brought parents and teachers together. It taught us that a successful urban school needs an active parent/teacher/community

alliance to sustain it and also a common vision of what the school is working towards.

We not only survived the first year, we are now in the fourth year, and focused no less than in the beginning on the hard questions of how to provide a quality, anti-racist, humane education to an urban student population.

Our K-through- 5 grade school has a population of 350 students who are 60 percent hispanic, 24 percent African-American, 13 percent white and the rest Asian and native American; and about 70 percent of them are eligible for free lunch. I think our strong emphasis on bilingualism, multiculturalism, and anti-racism makes us somewhat distinct.

We are attempting to build our school around principles familiar to progressive educators. Let me now turn briefly to describe the main features this practice, show how our thinking has evolved over our first three years, and point out problems that we are struggling with in each area:

Our two-way bilingual program. Native Spanish and English-speakers are in the same classrooms based on the belief that every child has the right to learn a second language, including her or his own. This enhances students' self-esteem, because no matter what social class they come from, they bring something of value to the classroom -- their language. We have learned that for successful bilingual learning there has to be a strict separation of the two languages and language environments, so that children are forced to use their second language. If lessons and class activities are always conducted bilingually, i.e. a teacher explains the material first in one language and then another, the students may become lazy and only rely on their native tongue.

During our first year each teacher had a self-contained classroom and conducted it bilingually, using an every-other-day approach. We found it difficult to keep the languages separate and we relied on more concurrent translation than we thought appropriate. The second year, the five-year-old kindergarten teachers adopted an approach we first heard about while visiting P.S. 84 in Manhattan. The two teachers team-teach two classes of children. The children are in two groups. One day they go to the Spanish-

room and receive instruction in Spanish; the next day they go to the English room and receive instruction in English. The teachers are bilingual, but one always teaches in English and one always in Spanish; one always remaining in English, and the other always in Spanish. Two separate language environments were established, and the children -- not the teachers -- were the ones who moved on an every-other-day basis.

At the beginning of our third year, after consultation and a visit to Fratney by a teacher from P.S. 84, we adopted this team-teaching approach for all the grades. We recognized that the advantages of language separation and team teaching outweighed the disadvantage of relating to twice as many students. This approach, which depends on collaboration and team-teaching, forced us to develop innovative ways to increase our joint planning time. Team teaching, it should be noted, is easier said than done. Logistical problems still plague us -- such as the doubling of the number of parent-teacher conferences each teacher must attend. Other complications stemming from personal style differences remind us that team-teaching is like marriage without the possibility of divorce.

The second hallmark of our program is our *multicultural anti-racist curriculum*. Our vision of multiculturalism goes beyond what we call the 3-fs -- facts, foods, and faces. While we incorporate human relations type activities, we also attempt to address issues of race and power. We highlight the experiences of people of color in our school-wide themes, and attempt to draw on music, history, art, stories, poetry, and literature from various geopolitical groups such as African-Americans, hispanics, native Americans and Asian-Americans. We also believe children should be taught to be anti-racist, i.e. that racism is unscientific, immoral, and that it has been a damaging social disease throughout our nation's history.

Incorporating a multicultural anti-racist curriculum has been difficult. Quality materials are hard to find. Official school textbooks are grossly inadequate. As reported in the December 1990 issue of *Rethinking Schools*, the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that of the 4,000 children's books

published in 1989, only 38 were authored or illustrated by African-Americans. Moreover, building a multicultural curriculum with teachers and parents who are themselves products of a racist society poses continuous problems and conflicts. We have found, therefore, that it is useful to define multicultural anti-racist education on a continuum. This continuum begins with adding material to the existing curriculum. It moves to making non-European cultures thoroughly integrated into many subject areas, and eventually develops to a more transformative and active stage. In classrooms we analyze the messages our students get on TV, in children's books and in text books. But our ultimate goal is that they not just understand the world; they struggle to change it.

Thirdly, La Escuela Fratney has adopted the *whole language and the natural approach* to learning first and second languages. We believe children learn to listen, speak, read and write by listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Our classrooms are student-centered, experience-based, and language-rich. What does this mean? For example, our children write in their journals daily. We use big books, shared reading, book clubs, storytelling, the writing process, daily interactive journals, drama and puppetry. We have a publishing center in our school, where kids have published books, such as *When I Go Fishing; All about Me; Don't be Afraid Marisela: We are Your Friends; Women in My Life, etc.*

Now in the fourth year of using whole language, we are reflecting on the shortcomings of our efforts. In particular, we are looking at how to ensure that those students who are not progressing as fast as we (and their parents) think is appropriate, might be better served. One change we made is to set aside certain time blocks during the day to have guided reading groups in the dominant language of the children. Thus a child who is having difficulty reading in her first language, would receive reading instruction in that language on a daily basis

But the struggle to build an entire curricula with minimum use of textbooks, to acquire multicultural resources and math manipulatives, organize them, and hold onto them, and to develop creative, integrated lessons is

overwhelming. Add to that over-crowded classrooms -- 27 in first grade, up to 30 in fifth -- and little planning time, and you have an extremely difficult situation. On top of that, we attempt to assess our children using performance-based measures, such as observational checklists and portfolios, which are very time-consuming activities. Finally -- and this might be an understatement -- our student population is less than naturally inclined to be self-disciplined and cooperative.

Fourth, we stress *cooperative learning*, democratic discipline, and the building of children's self-esteem. Our first year verged on disaster because we overestimated the responsibilities children would be able to handle. Specifically we failed to anticipate that a large percentage of the children who chose to come to our school were having little success at their previous schools. They had been significantly damaged; they had been given no responsibilities in the past. They were unable to handle rights as simple as being able to take a pass and go to the bathroom on their own (i.e. without direct teacher supervision). So we adopted the strategy that we must help students make the transition between their past, where they've been treated like mindless sheep, and their future, where we want them to act like self-conscious human beings.

By the second year we wrote a Chapter I proposal that put a self-esteem specialist in our school full-time. She team-taught with classroom teachers using specific interventions to enhance students' self-esteem. We also built a peer mediation program with our 4th and 5th graders, which has met with moderate success. We do considerable cross-age tutoring with older children helping the younger ones, as they read and write books together. This helps both sets of students. For example, a fourth-grade teacher was having trouble with her students' behavior when they went on walking field trips to the nearby Milwaukee River -- the kids would get too close to the river. This behavior changed dramatically when she paired her students with first graders. The older students outdid themselves to make sure that the younger ones didn't go too near the water.

Our teachers also use class meetings to help set

classroom rules at the beginning of each year, problem-solve throughout the year, and to plan each class's approach to our school-wide themes.

Fifth, we use a *thematic approach* in our curriculum. We try to integrate as much of the curriculum as possible through our school-wide themes, which teachers and parents develop on an annual basis. We stress social responsibility and action. This year our themes are: We Respect Ourselves and the World, We Send Messages When We Communicate, We Can Make a Difference on Planet Earth, We Tell Stories of the World. Within the context of each theme, we also try to choose a school-wide project. For example, in exploring the theme, "We Send Messages When We Communicate", one of the sub-themes was "TV Can Be Dangerous to Your Health". We organized a no-tv week during which students, their families, and staff pledged not to watch tv for an entire week. It was an exciting project that engendered some controversy. As the students recorded their tv habits in logs, our little school confirmed what is common knowledge: we are a nation of tv addicts, with children among the most addicted. The average five-year-old, for example, will spend 5,000 hours in front of tv before entering kindergarten. That's more time than he or she will spend talking with his/her parents during his/her entire life, and longer than it takes to get a college degree. As a Fratney parent described the project in last spring's issue of *Rethinking Schools*, the project had differing impacts on families but the general consensus is that we should do it again this year.

A sixth goal is to develop *critical thinking* among our children and the ability to critique society. We have a commitment to developing deep thinking abilities in our students. This manifests itself in different ways -- from stressing problem-solving in our math program, to helping children develop the skills of social critique as we explore community and world issues together. In our work, we often follow the example of Paulo Freire and Celestin Freinet. We have a long way to go in this area. One of the criticisms of our no-tv week was that we just asked people to stop watching tv; we didn't analyze what was on it. So this year that will be a major focus.

Finally, but certainly not leastly, *parents and teachers run our school*. We have a school-based management, in which a council of parents and staff members meet monthly and make the major decisions. We chose our principal, rewrote our report card, developed policies around homework, parent involvement, and multicultural education, redirected parts of our school budget and developed a policy which encouraged critical discussion of the Gulf War. We also have a functioning curriculum committee, a fundraising committee, and a building committee -- the latter being a group of staff that meets regularly to deal with immediate school issues.

Significant parent involvement is one of two or three key characteristics of a successful school. We had significant participation in the first two stages of struggling for the school, but once it opened the initial euphoria diminished and parent involvement declined. What we found was that those parents who continued to come out were mostly white and middle-class, even though the number of white children in our school is a small percentage of the student body. We did three things to try to correct that imbalance. First we established quotas for our site-based management council, so that African-American and hispanic parents were ensured seats. Second we decided to redirect money from our budget to hire two part-time parent organizers -- a Mexican-American and an African-American. Finally, with the help of the Wisconsin Writing Project, which is part of the National Writing Project, we developed a parent project. We paid 15 parents to participate in a six-week evening workshop in which they discussed school issues and wrote about their children.

Our school is also committed to community involvement. Last year we worked with community activists to demand a new tot lot at our school. Our tot lot was dominated by a jungle gym in the shape of a tank. When we took over the school, we refused to follow the easy route to have it removed, as some in the Milwaukee peace movement recommended. Instead we involved parents and students in the process and set our goal in the larger context of peace education. Our preparation paid off as we demanded from the city that it give us \$70,000 to pay for

construction. The Mayor's office opposed us at first, saying the city only replaced two tot lots a year and that we were number 60 on the list. The thought of waiting 30 years didn't hold a lot of appeal for us. Their second argument was that if they gave into the Fratney parents and students, then "Who knows, maybe other school communities would demand the same". We laughed at this argument, proceeded with our organizing and won the new tot lot.

The absurdity of waiting 30 years to fix up a run-down tot lot in a working-class neighborhood in Milwaukee reflects the even more absurd priorities of larger society. For the price of just two of the tanks used in the recent Persian Gulf War, or of four Patriot missiles, we could rebuild all 60 tot lots that need renovation in Milwaukee.

And just as the Fratney tot lot depended on demanding a reprioritization of public funding, so too does the success of the entire Fratney experiment. Large class sizes, lack of teacher planning time, and the broader problems of poverty, child abuse, and unemployment all reflect the privileging of private profit over human need.

For our efforts to bear fruit we must have not just a local vision, but a national vision as well. We must pursue education reform in the context in which it is embedded. Our schools cannot be saved in isolation from saving our cities, our families, and our children.

LESSONS FROM THE YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Based on these and other experiences, I see five lessons and subsequent challenges to the progressive movement in education.

First, we must convince ourselves and our colleagues that people can change City Hall. Feelings of powerlessness have grown in recent times with the failure of the peace movement to avert the barbaric Persian Gulf War or to reduce the military budget. It is all the more pressing that in teacher lounges, at PTA meetings, and at teacher union meetings, we replace griping and cynicism with critique and organizing. There is absolutely no reason for the major education decisions to continue to be made by bureaucrats,

legislators, or businessmen who are removed from the everyday issues and problems of schools. We allegedly live in a democracy; and it is time we all start acting as if we actually do. In fact, that should be a major goal of teaching -- to teach our students the civic courage to fight for change despite difficulties and obstacles.

A second challenge is to organize ourselves. We need organization -- whether it be in study groups, union caucuses, councils running a local school, community groups, or newspaper collectives -- whatever the form. We also need ways to influence and organize even wider groups of people. In Milwaukee, we have found a newspaper to be a useful tool. The Minneapolis Better Schools Referendum Campaign used leaflets, broadsides and a massive phone bank to convince the Minneapolis population to approve a referendum last year to increase their taxes to substantially reduce class size.

A third challenge for progressive teachers is to recognize that all teaching is political. In the words of Afro-Caribbean educator Enid Lee, all education is biased. What does this mean? It means that the everyday decisions made by teachers of what to teach and not to teach is a political decision. It might not be overly conscious, but it is political or biased nonetheless. I am tired of looking at catalogs of educational materials that claim to promote thematic study and whole language only to find them dominated by topics such as "bears" or "horses". In a society as divided by race and class inequities as this one, it is irresponsible for progressive teachers not to focus at least part of their curriculum on social justice issues. We must unapologetically foster anti-racist sentiments and social activism within our students. A central component of such education must be the development of deep thinking skills whereby students learn to critically examine the world, including textbooks, newspapers, and tv.

The fourth challenge is for progressives to move beyond the reformation of one particular school and to agitate for systemic curricular reform and structural change. The renaissance of any particular school -- whether it be Fratney, the Bronx New School or Central Park East -- must be defended. These schools deserve more power and resources

in the hands of the local councils of parents and educators who are running them. They serve as models for other educators. At the same time we must admit the limitations of school-by-school reform. Most of the fine alternative schools of the 1960s died as their originators moved on. The success of many of these schools, Frattney included, depends on the expenditure of ridiculous amounts of time and energy, something which is rarely reproducible.

We must institutionalize structures that allow and foster these kinds of change within the public schools and within the teaching profession itself. Perhaps we might learn from Mexican teacher-activists who for decades have been fighting against brutal and reactionary Mexican governments. Their slogan is *de las aulas a las calles* -- "from the classrooms to the streets". They understand the necessity to both transform the consciousness and practice of individual teachers, while at the same time defending experimental schools and demanding systemic curricular and structural reform, as well as societal change.

For us in the United States, it means class sizes must be substantially reduced and the teacher-day restructured, so that teachers can reflect, collaborate, and think. We don't need the business model that speaks of efficient hierarchies and higher productivity. Nor do we need market place solutions of choice, which have done such a miserable job of solving problems of housing, jobs and health care. We need a radical, participatory democracy that involves parents, teachers and principals, as educational partners, taking both power and responsibility for quality and humane education.

A fifth challenge is for the progressive movement to put race relations at the center of its work. Historian W.E.B. Dubois' prophetic claim, that "the problem of the 20th century is the issue of the color line", rings as true today as when the words were written at the start of the century; a time when the lynching of black men in the South was still commonplace. Putting race at centerpoint means, among other things, the development of bold, anti-racist multicultural curricula; the building of alliances with parent and community groups of people of color around a host of education and community issues; and demanding that colleges and universities recruit and train minority teachers.

Some progressive educators understand the centrality of race at least in the area of curricula, where the issue has exploded on the national scene with a new offensive by the right wing. While our meager resources don't allow us the opportunity to compete with the fictions that are contained in the coverage on the issue by such magazines as *Time*, we need to find ways to counteract the growing anti-multicultural sentiments. One way, I believe, is to use the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas as the starting point for discussing a multitude of issues about race, culture, and oppression. To that end, we at *Rethinking Schools* are proud to have published over 120,000 copies of our special edition, *Rethinking Columbus*.

The final challenge I see is for us to get out of our "small circle mentality". We need to look beyond our classrooms and our schools, even beyond our city limits and state lines. We must link our local struggles to other struggles -- both geographically so we learn from and support one another, but also politically so we draw connections between schooling and conditions in society-at-large. People speak of urban children being at risk. I believe it is time this country declares urban educational systems and our decaying cities "at risk".

The American people have permitted the channeling of wealth into the hands of a small corporate elite, perhaps one to two percent of our society, and into voracious military budgets. These budgets of death must be cut dramatically and social service spending, particularly for education for children, must be increased. For a brief moment, in the winter of 1989, the destruction of the Berlin Wall gave us hope that outrageous military spending could be brought down also. Unfortunately the concept of a "peace dividend" is an oxymoron for corporate America. And Bush's "New World Order" has, for the time being at least, buried hopes of redirecting the national priorities under the sands of an American Desert Storm. But we do need a peace dividend. Not because the Russians are no longer coming, but in order to have peace and justice in our country. We must take our nation's wealth and direct it towards human needs and services and not towards private profit and death.

Specifically , progressives should unite together in

groups such as the National Coalition of Education Activists -- to put forth a political agenda for the 1990s. For example, we should demand a national school reconstruction fund to rebuild inner city schools, radically reduce class size, and to create a new teacher corp. Such new schools should become centerpieces in our ravaged neighborhoods. They should be open 16 hours a day and serve as community centers in the evenings and weekends. Such intergenerational, recreational, cultural centers could become lifelines in our community. Such a massive program would have the side benefit of increasing the number of jobs in our cities, and begin to put urban schools on par with suburban schools by providing libraries, art rooms, music rooms, performance areas, and computer rooms to the children who need such facilities the most. In Milwaukee we estimate that such an endeavor would require \$232 million worth of new schools and \$63 million in salaries to new teachers. This is equivalent to 10 hours of spending for the U.S. military budget last year.

Restructuring our national priorities is important for a more fundamental reason. We need to radically improve the *life chances* of our young people. Without jobs or the hopes of jobs, without decent housing, health care, or recreation and cultural opportunities, there is no reason for our young people to stay in school. And they don't. Why stay in school only to find unemployment or a minimum wage job if dropping out can lead to fun and the possibility of making lots of money dealing drugs?

The life chances of our young people directly affect the quality of life in our cities and schools, and the current military budget is having disastrous effects on the life chances of our youth. Moreover the military budget, and the culture that surrounds it, is fostering a climate of violence unprecedented in human history.

It is my belief that the national teacher unions, the N.E.A. and the A.F.T., should deal with this head-on and adopt a perspective of social justice unionism. They should mount a joint effort to mobilize their membership and build local, state, and national coalitions to launch an international campaign to redirect our national priorities. Given the deepening crisis in our cities and schools, anything less than

this will soon be morally irresponsible.

For many people, the idea that our nation's wealth could be turned away from weapons of death towards products of life is, of course, nothing more than a pipe dream. And a dream it is, much in the sense of the dream Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., put forward over 25 years ago.

But in order to fulfill our dreams we must organize, just as Martin Luther King did. We need to speak of dreams; provide a vision of what could be, and then spend our time - our lives -- being activists, organizing for it.

I think one of the biggest problems in America, and it is a direct result of the institution that most of us work in, is the sad fact that people don't know their history. And by history I don't mean dates and places. I mean the historical underpinnings of key concepts, like "peace - justice", and "peoples are the makers of history", which define a radical democratic ethos. I mean, too, the story of the important social movements that brought life to our nation's blood-stained past. Children must be helped to realize that we are conscious bearers of history, the actors -- not objects being acted on.

To those who say it is impossible to transform our school systems or to reorder our national priorities, to those who say such goals are a romantic dreaming, I say look at our history. I ask, would it take more effort than that by the abolitionist movement as they successfully fought to end the scourge of slavery? Would it take more work than that by the suffragist movement as they successfully fought to win the right for women to vote? Or than that of the labor movement which won union rights, social security, and Medicare? Or the peace movement that finally helped end the war in Vietnam?

I don't know about you, but as far as I know, we only travel on this planet for a short period of time. I find it obscene that during my short stay here the incredible resources of this rich nation should be wasted on death and destruction, while children suffer, go hungry and lose their spirit to live.

I believe that in this last decade of the second millennium we have the responsibility and the opportunity to radically improve our school systems and help save the

youth of our nation. To lose one more generation of young people to the despair of violence and drugs will literally be suicidal for our society.

If we truly care about the future of this planet and our children, we must not forget the words of that great American, Frederick Douglass:

*Those who profess to favor freedom,
and yet deprecate agitation
are men who want crops without plowing up the ground.
They want rain without thunder and lightning.
They want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.
This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a
physical one; or it
may be both moral and physical.
But it must be struggle.
Power concedes nothing without a demand.
It never did, and it never will.*

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